

# **Committee on Resources**

## **Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health**

---

### **Testimony**

---

STATEMENT OF  
WILLIAM N. DENNISON  
Plumas County Supervisor, District 3  
BEFORE THE  
COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FORESTS AND FOREST HEALTH  
LEGISLATIVE HEARING  
H.R. 2389 AND H.R- 1185  
JULY 13, 1999  
COMMITTEE ROOM 1334 LONGWORTH HOB

CHAIRMAN CHENOWETH AND MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE:

I am Bill Dennison, Plumas County Supervisor, District 3, in California. We are situated in Northern California, north of Sacramento and west of Reno Nevada. Today, I am speaking on behalf of the Plumas County Board of Supervisors and the National Association of Counties (NACo). I chair the NACo Public Lands Steering Committee, which shares a great concern in our issue today, since 800 counties throughout our nation receive revenue from the Federal timber sale receipts program. We are part of the Forest County Schools Coalition which currently has endorsements from over 500 groups in 32 States and is growing daily. You are addressing a very important issue.

Thank you for scheduling these legislative hearings and for the opportunity to convey support for H.R. 2389 and the reasons why such a bill is necessary.

A United States General Accounting Office report to past Congressman Vic Fazio contains a statement which summarizes an important part of the issue before us today: "Since the early 1900's the Congress has enacted more than 20 laws directing that a state or county be compensated for a federal presence in the state". Congress recognized that the formation of the National Forests were large-scale withdrawals, with acreage's being as high as fifty to ninety percent of some counties gross acreages. Local government was concerned there would not be adequate tax base to provide appropriate public services. The substantial opposition to this action on the part of the federal government was mitigated by the Act of 1908 and as noted by GAO has been reaffirmed 19 more times over the years. It was a promise to the people that must be sustained. This compensation has been provided in varying percentages, but for the most part 25% of the gross receipts from commercial national forest activities have been distributed to counties through state government for the use of schools and roads. (16 U.S.C. 500). Over 95% of those funds have been from timber sale receipts.

Recent changes in national forest land management philosophy and practices have caused large portions of the National Forests to be considered off-limits for commercial activities. Some of these changes have been initiated by law, some by agency policy change and some may be temporary, as agencies search for scientific truths to answer the intricacies of the Endangered Species Act and other conflicting laws which have been passed by Congress over the years. The end-result has been an average loss of about 75% of county revenue from federal timber sale receipts.

In my County of Plumas, federal lands constitute 73% of the land base and our revenue has been reduced from almost \$9 million to about \$1 million during the last 8 years. Plumas County has only a population of 22,000, with a local budget of \$44 million. We are experiencing the impact of the \$4 million dollars lost per year to each of the school and road departments.

It requires \$4, 1 million to properly operate the public works department. Our Plumas County Director of Public Works has recently reported that this year revenues are estimated to be \$1.8 million from gas tax and \$0.5 million from the 25% timber sale receipts. The remainder of the budget must come from our diminishing reserve, which will be depleted in 2 years. The director reported that he began the reduction in asphalt paving 3 years ago and chip sealing of the roads 2 years ago, in order to maintain a reasonable reserve. That fact is recognized in the obvious road deterioration throughout our county, but the degradation will accelerate if we can not return to a regular road maintenance program.

Next year, if there is not a replacement of the lost timber We receipts revenues, we have been told that there may be a reduction in snow removal services. We receive snow depths of 2 to 3 feet in a given storm, with total depths up to 10 feet in northern Plumas County. The loss of snow removal potential presents a severe deterrent for our emergency services, which include health, fire and law enforcement. These are often life-threatening situations, not a luxury forgone.

The next budget considerations which the Board of Supervisors will be forced to face will be personnel reductions in two years, or less.

Our Plumas County Unified School District Superintendent, Dennis Williams made visits to the Hill with the Quincy Library Group the past two years in recognition of the financial crises he has been facing. Mr. Williams reported to me last week that school budget cuts, as a result of decreased forest receipt revenues has resulted in the following impacts:

- \* Class size has increased in grades 4-12 to a 30:1 student:teacher ratio.
- \* All funding was eliminated for all extra-curricular activities but some has been restored over the past two years as a result of a temporary Necessary Small School funding provision from **the State**.
- \* Custodial and maintenance staffs have been reduced.
- \* School site supply budgets have been reduced.
- \* High school counselors were eliminated.
- \* Administrative staff was reduced.
- \* Transportation was reduced by eliminating several bus stops.

I have attached a chart and a graph which depicts the forest receipts history of reductions to the Plumas County School District.

It is for these reasons that a nation-wide coalition was formed to pursue legislation that is based on the

following principles:

\* The corrective legislation must cover all National Forest Counties nationwide, including the Oregon and California (O&C) Counties. This is important because the impact of federal land policy changes are being felt from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

\* Payments are to be **guaranteed based** on 100% of the three highest years during the period 1986 to the date of passage of a Bill. This is an important factor, because **some of the eastern** forests have increased their sale program over the past couple of years. The **Administration's proposal** to restrict the base to 76% of the period between 1985 and 1996, would penalize these eastern states. The imposition of a cap on the total increase to a county, as proposed by the Administration is also unfair and unacceptable.

\* "Either/or" language must be included to allow for payments based on actual receipts if the amount is greater than the short-term guaranteed payment level. ( See Section 5, subsection (b)(2) \* CPI indexing should be included. (See Section 4, subsection (b).)

\* Most important, there must be no changes to the Act of 1908. The proposal for changes by the Administration during the past year has been coined a "decoupling" from production of our national forests. This constitutes an entitlement which the coalition is unwilling to accept. There are several good reasons for this position:

First, we believe that the national forests are in terrible condition and must be managed. We face catastrophic wildfires that can best be minimized through strategic removal of trees. Reinvestment in our watersheds, not lock-up of our resources is the right thing to do.

Second, the management of these lands provide products and jobs for our nation that far exceed the 25% timber sale revenue. It is important that in the long-term the Act of 1908 and those 19 Congressional passed Bills that followed are upheld to assure that the revenues and production are not separated.

Third, our nation should not initiate more entitlements, when there are means to pay for programs through our existing resources.

\* The last principle relates to the fact that we are only requesting a **short-term "safety net"** and the means to pursue a **long-term solution** to securing the delinquent revenues.

We believe that the latter is set forth in Section 7. DEVELOPMENT OF LONG-TERM METHODS TO MEET STATUTORY PUBLIC SERVICES. Under item (c) (2) you will note that we wish to increase the revenues, but only where "...ecological, economic and social factors are accorded equal consideration in the management of Federal lands." The committee shall terminate three years after the date of the enactment of this Bill. That and the provision that payments to eligible States and eligible counties are to be replaced by a long-term solution within two years after the date of submission of the report required by Section (7)(c)(1), is indication of our commitment to a quick solution.

We agree that land use management should not be for the sole purpose of removing timber. That is why we supported the passage of the Herger-Feinstein Quincy Library Group Act. It is why we now view that bill as the means to a long-term solution to the issue before us today.

You will recall that QLG bill passed the House of Representatives by a vote of 428 to 1. It then passed the Senate and is now being reviewed by Forest Service under their Draft Environmental Impact Statement. Currently, the DEIS and the QLG bill is under attack by Sierra Club. Not because it is a bad bill , but because the Club has adopted a platform to stop the harvest of **all** trees on National Forest lands. In fact the

Herger-Feinstein QLG Act is a very balanced approach to forest management.

With the chairs permission, I would like to submit a copy of an eight page article in the July 1999 Smithsonian-- A Town Buries T Axe It emphasizes the balanced management approach which you all embraced and the need to protect against catastrophic fires through cooperative land management. Author Edwin Kiester Jr. spent considerable time touring the Plunias, Lassen and portion of the Tahoe National Forests to develop an understanding of why management of **our natural** resources are necessary and how the Quincy Library Group (QLG) turned controversy into consensus. The Quincy Library Group teamed the lesson of "fuel ladders" and the need to thin the overstocked forest stands. The author notes that the Cottonwood fire which broke out in July of 1994, "...represented a major shift in QLG strategy." "The fire broke out in the undergrowth and quickly jumped to the crowns of the pines, swept from treetop to treetop and soon became an inferno". The fire burned 47,000 acres, almost consumed the town of Loyalton and cost the state and federal governments \$12 million before it was contained. The QLG decided that the chance of this catastrophe could have been reduced by thinning of the forests.

I enter this article into the record because it displays the fact that the QLG Bill is the potential long-term solution to the problems which I have reviewed above. It is a solution that has been approved by Congress and now awaits the implementation of the adaptive management process that can be fine-tuned and used in many other areas of our nation.

The Smithsonian article quoted Bill Coates, a past Plumas County Supervisor and one of the originators of the QLG as a closing to Kiester's article: "America needs its Rural America. You cant rive in Ohio and visit Plumas unless there's a hospital there, unless there's law enforcement, unless there are roads to drive on. You have to have local infrastructure, so that if they get hurt we can treat them, it they get lost we can find them. To keep that fabric together, the people of the town have to unite, to work together, to put aside their differences for the good of the town and the good of everyone."

Chairman Chenoweth and honorable committee members, that is the essence of the reason why I am before you today. We are not asking for hand-outs, or entitlements. We are asking for the opportunity to unite, work together, put aside our differences and develop a solution. If rural communities are to continue to serve our nation, there must be more consideration of the resources which they are willing and able to provide and there is a need to fulfill the promises of our federal government to pay it's fair share for maintaining our county schools and roads.

To that end, we will thank you for support of HR- 2389.

###